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The Burden of Justice: Louise Erdrich Talks About 'The Round House'

By John Williams October 24, 2012 12:09 pm

Louise Erdrich's 14th novel, "The Round House," was recently named a finalist for the National Book Award. It's set on the North Dakota Ojibwe reservation that is so familiar to her readers, and it tells the story of Joe, a 13-year-old who seeks justice after his mother is brutally attacked. In her review, Michiko Kakutani wrote that the novel "opens out to become a detective story and a coming-of-age story, a story about how Joe is initiated into the sadnesses and disillusionments of grown-up life and the somber realities of his people's history." In a recent e-mail interview, Ms. Erdrich discussed the difficulty of obtaining justice on reservations, the influence of her father on her fiction and more. Below are edited excerpts from the conversation:

Q.

In The New York Times Book Review, Maria Russo said this book represented a departure because your novels "have usually relied on a rotating cast of narrators, a kind of storytelling chorus." There's a fairly large cast of characters in the book, so why did you decide to have Joe narrate the whole thing?

A.

In order to write a novel about jurisdictional issues on American Indian reservations — without falling asleep — I decided to try a character-driven suspense narrative. Personally, I always envied and wanted the freedom that boys have. I get a kick out of 13-year-old boys I know. Also, as this is a book of memory, I am able to add the resonance of Joe's maturity.

Q.

It's hard as a reader not to share Joe's desire for revenge on the man who attacked his mother. Do you think he's ultimately wrong to pursue it?

A.

Wrong or right, for many families this is the only option when justice is unobtainable. I wanted the reader to understand what taking on that burden is like. On any state elections map, the reservations are blue places. Native people are most often progressives, Democrats, and by no means gun-toting vigilantes. Being forced into this corner is obviously an agonizing decision.

Q.

The novel's plot partly revolves around the problem of jurisdiction that keeps some brutal crimes on tribal land from being efficiently investigated and tried. Has there been any progress in fixing that problem?

A.

President Obama signed the Tribal Law and Order Act into law in 2010 — it was an important moment of recognition. More recently the Senate Judiciary Committee crafted a helpful piece of legislation. The Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2012 would have given tribal nations limited jurisdiction over sexual predators regardless of race. Right now tribal courts can only prosecute tribal members. The problem is that over 80% of the perpetrators of rapes on reservations are non-Native. Most are not prosecuted. The bill went forward only to stall in the House, blocked by Republican votes. Hate to say it, but that one's on them.

Q.

In your "Art of Fiction" interview with *The Paris Review*, you said, "My father is my biggest literary influence." Where do you feel his presence most in "The Round House"?

A.

My father is the sort of man who would have spoken a monologue like one that Judge Coutts [Joe's father] speaks in the novel, which includes a gundog on Dealey Plaza, a flagpole sitter, the Ojibwe clan system, the Orthian chanted by Arion of Methymna before he was cast into the sea, and Metis fiddle playing. He is also famous for a frightful stew like the one that appears in this book. My father created the pot of stew while my mother was in the hospital recovering from the birth of one of my sisters. He kept adding various elements to the stew all week — just heating it up in the same pot. That last sentence is beginning to sound like a book metaphor, so here I'll stop.

Q.

At a panel that was part of The New Yorker Festival a couple of weeks ago, discussing the general lack of strong marriages in fiction, Lorrie Moore said she felt the marital life of Joe's parents was a central part of "The Round House." Do you agree that contemporary fiction is lacking portraits of strong marriages? And how central to you was the marriage in this book when you were planning and writing it?

A.

My parents' marriage is a gift to everyone around them — 60 years of making their kids laugh. How many parents are actually funny? It isn't easy to write a happy marriage (Tolstoy's dictum). So of course the only way to write about a happy marriage is to have a malevolent outside force attempt to destroy it.

Q.

The North Dakota Ojibwe reservation in your novels has frequently been compared to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County for its scope and variety of characters. Have you been directly influenced or inspired by Faulkner?

A.

Most writers have been influenced by Faulkner.

Q.

How do you keep track of the characters you've created in this world? Are there genealogical charts hanging on your walls?

A.

I love this question because I can mention Trent Duffy, the best copy editor in New York. Trent has meticulously cataloged and recorded each character's family tree as well as all of their habits and the color of their hair, eyes, nail polish, etc. For myself, I have only messy notebooks and bits of hotel notepads jammed up with ideas.

Q.

"The Round House" is a sequel of sorts to "Plague of Doves," which also revolves around a violent crime, and I've read that there's a third related book planned. Will the third book deal with similar themes of violence and justice?

A.

Talking about how I might write the next book is like talking about whether or not to have sex. Any dithering ruins it.

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